

AUGUST 7, 1986

After the adverse reaction from the mare's milk in Mongolia, I was worried how I'd act getting back on the train to ride down to Beijing. In the '30s, during that other depression, I watched the Army Remount Service load a big string of horses on the train at my grandfather's shipping pens. By the time those veterinarians and cavalry soldiers had loaded those old ranch ponies in box cars, every punch stick and mesquite limb available had horse blood and hair stuck on them.

But things went smoothly at the station here and I didn't balk or throw a fit on the boarding platform. It's good luck that I was calm, because on the first morning here in the capital I was selected to go down for a briefing with an ex-congressman and two other delegates at the U.S. Consulate's office. I forgot all about Mongolia and wild horses as we drove down embassy road in a new black car with a special chauffeur.

The diplomatic area was a small sample of our country bricked off from the foreign world. In the foyer of the agriculture division's office there was a water cooler that looked like the first cold beer sign must look on the trail out of Death Valley. It'd been over two weeks since we'd had a cold drink. I didn't want to look too much like a regular fellow around the water cooler for fear that the American secretaries and attaches bustling about might think all tax payers were as easy to please as we were.

Our host was an alert young guy assigned to representing the U.S. in agriculture trade and treaties. "The Chinese," he said, "practice a practical brand of Communism." The way he explained that was that when they learned how to make something work, they'd adopt the ideas to the manifesto. "State farms and the old communes to run them are ending," he told us. For example, he said that the hotel where we were staying was owned and managed by a commune, but not to confuse the meaning of commune with our idea of a colony of people living in a collective situation.

Considering the amount of problems we'd had at the hotel with our laundry service and malfunctioning plumbing, I had just supposed that the place came under an ancient Chinese legal doctrine that covered loose and unbranded livestock, untitled and unclaimed real property, and ghost ships found drifting on the high seas without a flag. Incorrectly, I had supposed that a gang of opium dealers or freebooters had kidnapped the managers years ago and had never been able to collect a ransom.

A fine film of dust hangs over Beijing everyday. Unlike the rich, heavily flavored dust that pours over the Shortgrass Country, the oriental variety makes tourists cough and snort and sneeze and stagger around in a manner that'll make Shortgrass hay fever look like a psychosomatic allergy.

Acupuncture is the accepted remedy for any disorder in the Orient. However, the Beijing distemper brings on such severe coughing spasms that it'd take a matador, or at least his top assistant, to seat a needle in the patient. I had considered donating my bum shoulder to Eastern medical science, but since I saw a doctor with his tray of needles ready for treatment, I am going to withhold the offer to see what develops the next decade in Chinese medicine.

Morale is fragile among the delegates. Homesickness prevail in some quarters and exhaustion in others. They've been mighty game crew to go through so much cultural

stress. I am so tired tonight, I may need an acupuncture needle in the morning to get out of bed.